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SUBJECT: BELARUSIAN BLOGGERS AND OFFICIALS COMMENT ON U.S. VISA BAN EXPANSION

Introduction and Summary

¶1. (U) On August 3, the USG expanded the list of Belarusians subject to special visa review procedures under Presidential Proclamation 8015. The previous list, which cannot be made public due to the Privacy Act, contained only those individuals directly linked to human rights abuses. The new expanded list includes entire classes of senior government officials, senior management of state-owned enterprises and their spouses. The Embassy announced the expansion of the list on August 7.

¶2. (SBU) The GOB called the expanded travel ban list "unreasonable" and threatened "to take relevant reciprocal steps". Though officials individually dismissed the sanctions, their reaction showed aggravation, and the issue also raised heated debate in the internet community. Some bloggers welcomed and strongly supported U.S. measures against the regime, while others deemed them unproductive and unfeasible, citing the consolidation and unity of the regime. The majority of the internet community predicting the GOB would not take strong measures in response to U.S. sanctions, as any such move could hurt Belarus' economic interests. End introduction and summary.

Officials Disturbed By Travel Restrictions Reinforcement

¶3. (U) On August 8, Chairwoman of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Lidiya Yermoshina called the U.S. travel restrictions a violation of international laws and a "Stalinist law" citing repression against family members of "enemies of the people". Her colleague, Secretary of the CEC Nikolay Lozovik, referred to restrictions as "profanity" and suggested that "banning state enterprises' general managers will not contribute to promotion of American goods in the Belarusian market". He also ironically noted that restrictions contradict general U.S. statements to establish world democracy, and added "soon no one in Belarus will be allowed entry" into the United States. Chief Judge of the Brest Oblast Tamara Suchok opined that the travel ban is "groundless", politically motivated, and has resemblance to fascism. Suchok felt that she was included unfairly as she saw "no guilt" or wrongdoing in announcing indicting verdicts in political cases.

Bloggers Encourage Further Travel Ban Expansion

¶4. (U) Popular Belarusian internet news portal TUT.by welcomed

comments on travel restrictions from its readers. The majority of forum participants endorsed U.S. sanctions and urged a further expansion of the list, often offering assistance with names and titles. The bloggers concurred that banning spouses would yield tangible repercussions, and officials would face repression similar to what democratic activists have to confront in Belarus. Readers also urged European countries, e.g. Croatia, Montenegro, Turkey, and other tourist destinations popular with officials, to adopt the same list. TUT.by visitors referred to the GOB officials as "time-servers", who receive rewards and privileges for completing any orders from the regime. At the same time, bloggers called for easing U.S. visa procedures common Belarusians.

Bloggers Express Skepticism over Travel Restrictions

15. (U) A group of bloggers argued that further travel restrictions would not be successful as the U.S. policies in Belarus had not been consistent, and some high-ranking officials received U.S. visas in the past. Bloggers insisted it was not the U.S. banning officials from their territory, but President Lukashenko, referred to as "Fuehrer," rigorously limiting and closely monitoring their travel to the West. They also emphasized it could be technically complicated for the U.S. Embassy Minsk "to match faces and names with titles and ranks" on the ban list. Some ironically noted an official having a "close relationship" with an opposition activist could use it as a pretext for claiming to be democratically oriented. Others scornfully proposed allowing entrance only to U.S.-backed presidential hopefuls or those who voted for democratic candidates and are able to present a copy of the bulletin as a proof. In general, this group of bloggers maintained that human rights deteriorated further since President Bush signed the first act envisaging a travel ban in 2004.

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Comment

16. (SBU) The extended travel ban list clearly incensed GOB officials, and some overtly expressed indignation. The internet community debated the latest U.S. sanctions against the regime and followed official statements arguing that the local nomenclature seems to be "sterilized" rather than "consolidated" due to the fear of tight control and repressions. Some independent experts concurred that travel restrictions will not develop into a critical blow at the regime, but have become yet another sign of increased pressure from the United States and EU on the regime to initiate democratic and reforms in Belarus.

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